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AUTHOR Ogawa, Dennis M.
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ABSTRACT

A study of Asian American communication depends upon an appreciation of the diversity of identity perceptions, the potential for cultural dissonance, and the linguistic difficulties of Asian immigrants. The variations and multiplicities found among Asian Americans in cultural background, settlement patterns, and cultural adaptions of different generations are necessary determinants of interethnic racial discord and jealousies rather than harmonious dialogue and cultural interchange. The recent trend toward recognizing bilingual education as both facilitating intercultural contact and enhancing communicative skills and techniques promises a more realistic cultural pluralism. (JM)

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IDENTITY, DISSONANCE AND BILINGUALISM:

COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS OF ASIAN AMERICAN ASSIMILATION

Dennis M. Ogawa

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Dennis M. Ogawa

The Asian American population comprises approximately 1.5 million individuals of Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Filipino and other Asian ancestry. In certain areas of the West Coast Asian Americans constitute a significant number, totaling about fifteen percent of the population of San Francisco and three and a half percent of Los Angeles. Overall, though, the group accounts for less than one percent of the entire population of the United States, creating by virtue of their small numbers an ethnic community with which most Americans would have little, if any, interracial communication. After all, how many Americans have the opportunity to meet an Asian American, communicate with and get to know someone of Asian ancestry?

That the chance for such contact is minimal, though, hardly concerns those who actively find themselves in communication situations with Asian Americans or scholars who continually seek to broaden their knowledge of interracial interactions and cultural comparisons. For such individuals, it is important to understand the various factors, points of commonality and differences involved in communicating with persons of Asian lineage. What are the common verbal and non-verbal problems characterizing such communication? What cultural or social variables are at play which help or hinder the interaction and integration of the minority group with the dominant society? If cultural and communicative problems emerge, how are they resolved?

To answer these questions, to gain perspective and working knowledge in the field of Asian American communication involves a consideration of a number of issues. First, the interethnic communicant would have to be aware of the multiplicities of identity perceptions existent within the broad nomenclature "Asian American"--varieties of self-identity between and within Asian ethnic groups defy unidimensional conclusions. Secondly,the commitment would have to understand that Asian American communication can be affected by several cultural values which in an American context can lead to a breakdown in interpersonal understandings--cultural incompatibilities between a modal American pattern and an Asian pattern can create a cultural dissonance in interaction. Finally, attention should be given to the growing number of new Asian immigrants to the United States and the linguistic problems encountered which can hinder the establishment of effective interethnic relations. Only by appreciating the diversity of identity perceptions, the potentials for cultural dissonance and the linguistic difficulties of the new immigrants can a preliminary study of Asian American communication reveal the adaptability and assimilation of Asian peoples into the American mainstream.

Identity Perception

The first requisite of effective communication is knowing the parties involved. With whom are you speaking? What are the established self-attitudes or behavioral antecedents brought to a conversation? What are the cultural or social purviews, the identity perceptions which are generated and maintained within the mind of the individual? Or more simply, how does the individual view himself? Such considerations are important because the nature of self-perceptions oftentimes is the unconscious basis upon which communication occurs. How, then, do Asian Americans perceive themselves in relation to American society?

It would be obvious even to the person of Asian ancestry who casually observes communication behavior, that the term Asian American could not be indiscriminately applied as if Japanese, Chinese or Filipinos were monolithic groups of people possessing identical interests, personalities or lifestyles. Though one can speak broadly about Asian Americans, Blacks or Native Americans, these expressions are inadequate to comprehend the broad spectrum of ethnic variation and individual differences found within each group. Indeed, a student of interracial communication emersed solely in ethnic generalities would soon find his "truths" buried by the more painful realities of intra-ethnic variations.

Of course people of Asian ancestry do share a number of mutual or common characteristics. The dominant society, ignorant of cultural or historical circumstance, recognizes Japanese, Chinese, Koreans, Filipinos or Vietnamese as all belonging to some nebulous "oriental mystic." Asians also share many similar historical experiences during their migration to the Western United States. And for purposes of quota admissions, hiring or governmental funding of projects, the bureaucracy has listed Asians under the same broad classification. Yet, taken as a series of individual ethnic groups from diverse regions of Asia, Asian Americans defy the tendency to be categorized culturally or socially with such a simplistic label. A diverse assortment of life-styles, personalities and communication concerns exist within the Asian American population, reflecting a diversity of cultural backgrounds, generations and influences of locality.

Within any ethnic group, identity perceptions are transformed by the historic and environmental forces working in a particular cultural situation and in a particular geographic area. Over time, individuals are affected by and reflect the social environments to which they have adapted. As Asian Americans have settled and assimilated into various American communities, their cultural world views have also been reshaped by specific environments. A comparison between those of Asian ancestry living in Hawaii and those on the West Coast, for example, clearly reveals the variations of culture and environment, lifestyle and attitudes existing within and between the ethnic groups.

The 1970 census shows that a large number of Asian Americans dwell in Hawaii and California:

Table I

	Japanese		Chinese		Filipinos	
	California	Hawaii	California	Hawaii	California	Hawaii
Total Population	213,277	217,175	170,419	52,583	135,248	95,680

Though the figures for both areas are significant, in Hawaii the Asian groups represent over 50 percent of the State's population whereas in California they comprise less than 5 percent. In contrast to other localities, the child raised in Hawaii finds a predominant number of his neighbors, friends and school teachers to be of Asian ancestry. The restaurants and take-out drive-ins serve a large array of Asian foods--rice is provided at all school lunch counters and chopsticks are part of the utensils used at most eating establishments. Asian American cultural referents from Japanese, Chinese and Filipino movie houses to Buddhist institutions, from Asian baseball leagues to large ethnic Chamber of Commerces create an atmosphere in which the Japanese, Chinese or Filipino American feels comfortable with his respective ethnic identity. Understandably, then, those of Asian ancestry in Hawaii find it difficult to identify with or appreciate the complaints of identity anxiety, minority persecution and Anglo-assimilation pressures so often expressed by California's Asian Americans. Charges often made on the West Coast, for example, citing the lack of Asian political or business leaders due to racial biases have little relevancy in Hawaii where both Senators and U.S. Representatives, as well as the Governor and many business executives are of Asian descent. Hawaii's Asian Americans also cannot relate to the general behavior and mannerisms of their West Coast counterparts whom they find more individualistic, self-oriented and aggressive. The urban detachment and pace of life commonly found in Los Angeles and San Francisco is hardly appreciated by people who live in an Island situation and who are not far removed from their rural roots. Because of such diverse environments, both groups consider themselves to be, and actually are, different.

Variations and multiplicities found among the entire ethnic population can be seen as well in the development of different generational patterns within each Asian American group. In Hawaii and the Mainland, there are five generations of Chinese, four Korean and Japanese and two to three generations of Filipinos--each generation sharing diverse historical experiences which have created unique intra-ethnic differences. The Japanese Americans, for example, are characterized by a number of generations: Issei (first), Nisei (second), Sansei (third), Yonsei (fourth) and Gosei (fifth). In terms of age the Issei are generally over sixty-five, the Nisei forty to sixty-five, Sansei fifteen to forty, Yonsei one to fifteen and the Gosei just now being born. Each generation exhibits cultural and social characteristics different from the other. The Issei have retained the Japanese language and many Japanese cultural practices. Their Sansei grandchildren, on the other hand, speak little Japanese and hardly practice "things" Japanese. For the Issei, English is rarely spoken whereas for the Sansei it is the native tongue and language of formal education. A diversity of lifestyles based on generational variations can, thus, be seen within the Japanese group, a diversity similarly found throughout the entire Asian American community.

From the differences in cultural background ranging from Japanese to Chinese to Filipino to Korean to Southeast Asian, to differences in settlement patterns from rural Hawaii to urban California, to a variety of differences in cultural adaptation between the generations, the "Asian American" label encompasses a multiplicity of identity perceptions frequently unintelligible when viewing the ethnic groups as a whole. Knowing that an individual is an "Asian American" tells dangerously little about the style, nature or intent of his communicative abilities. To think otherwise is to resort to a form of stereotyping incompatible with social realities.

Cultural Dissonance

The multiplicity of identity perception found within Asian American communities is a necessary determinant of interethnic communication. The individual encountering, for example, a third generation Chinese from Hawaii could not assume the same communication patterns when encountering a first generation Japanese from Los Angeles. Both are Asian Americans. But both have been shaped by wholly different historical, environmental and generational circumstances.

There are, however, certain cultural similarities running throughout the Asian American experience which will have meaning to understanding potential cultural dissonance in interethnic relations. No immigration group entirely divorces itself from the established cultural patterns of the homeland. While the culture of an ethnic group is ever-expanding and adapting to new social and technological situations, certain values or ancestral attitudes continue to influence and shape behaviors. Though perhaps modified through acculturative processes, such traditional values remain to function from generation to generation.

Among the several old world values which have possibly endured as determinants of Asian American communication behavior are those of filial piety, the obligation of children to their parents, and shame control, the fear of ridicule or criticism from others. Whereas in American society emphasis is placed on verbal communication, free and open expression, given filial piety and shame control such activity is not encouraged or demanded within the Asian American cultural matrix. Rather, preferences for acquiescence, conformity and the general subordination of the

individual to family and peer group are cultivated and function to serve as possible barriers to effective communication.

Characteristically, most Asian American families share a strong belief in the concept of filial piety--for the sake of familial stability an individual is expected to be obligated to and unquestioningly respectful of parental authority even to the point of sacrificing personal goals and aspirations. Under this dictum of restraint and deference, serious impediments to communication as generally practiced in contemporary American society may be exacerbated. Such social impediments to Asian American communicative abilities is the concern of Colin Watanabe, an instructor of reading and composition for Asian American students at the University of California in Berkeley. According to Watanabe, within the household, especially those of Chinese and Japanese ancestry, spontaneous and direct dialogue, argumentation and debate are seldom employed and in most instances discouraged.

> Argumentation is almost unheard of in traditional families; clearly defined roles of dominance and deference virtually rule out argumentation and debate. The role of the parent is to lay down the law; the duty of the child to listen and obey. Communication flows one way, from parent to child. Direct messages predominate, and exchanges are generally brief and perfunctory. Constantly battered by prohibitions and commands, the Asian child begins to see himself as an obeyer rather than a chooser.[2]

Understandably, such restricted interaction at home creates a difficult situation for the Asian American student who Watanabe finds struggling with verbal skills in the classroom. The child growing up having such difficulty expressing himself may in later years find that his communicative abilities deter him from fully interacting in several social situations such as school activities, neighborhood groups or community clubs.

The effects of filial piety clearly illustrate the importance of considering certain Asian American values as possible obstacles to communication. The point can be further underscored by considering the value of "shame." Shame control, in an Asian American context, is based upon the individual's identification with the expectations and sanctions of the family, peer group or community. For an individual to fail to behave in accordance with such external group norms causes "shame" for both him and the group. To avoid "shaming" the family or community becomes a heavy psychological responsibility, then, for the Asian American. These pressures of external group expectations can be characterized by the metaphor of a person walking a long street, lined with on-lookers. For the average American, the practice is that everyone generally minds his own business. As an American walks the street, an occasional on-looker glances at him, then turns away. He often proceeds without being watched. However, as the Asian American walks the street, every eye is on him watching his every movement, approving, disapproving. He is rarely given a moment of unwatched freedom because the experience of shame requires an audience--actions are based more on the fear of what others will think or say, the fear of outside ridicule and negative criticism rather than on personal estimation. How a person behaves according to his own conscience regardless of what others may think is not the primary concern.

Subordination of the individual to the peer group, fear of calling attention to oneself, constant checking of personal inclination in the interest of group acceptance consequently emerge as some of the characteristic behaviors stemming from shame-influence associated with Asian Americans. By operating to thwart the development of a strong sense of individuality, the constraints of shame also work to hinder the formulation of a conducive attitude toward open self-expression. Communicating one's thoughts, exposing one's feelings ideally result out of the needs of the individual and not that of the group. The avoidance of personal standards and evaluation for the concerns and interests of others rarely provides the necessary mind-set to generate creative ideas or to initiate free and spontaneous communication. Conceivably, while such behavior may not alienate members of Asian groups, for others in the dominant society placing high value on individual initiative and open dialogue, an entirely different if not negative response might develop. Viewed as a deterrent to expressive interaction, then, the construct of shame provides still another consideration of cultural factors which must be studied as possible communication barriers to integration and assimilation within an Asian American population.

The New Asian Immigrant and Bilingualism

The Asian Americans to which this paper has been addressed constitute a series of rather well-established ethnic communities with a variety of socio-economic characteristics and concerns. Historically, they immigrated to nineteenth century America when an expanding industrial society sought the cheap labor provided by Asiatics. Chinese immigration began as early as 1820, Japanese in 1861, Korean and Filipino a number of years later. Although various exclusionary laws were enacted against Asians in the course of their settlement, they have, to varying degrees, established roots and created a home for themselves and their children on U.S. soil. Today, Asian Americans are generally considered to be both socially and economically successful in their assimilation into American society. Judged in terms of family incomes in 1970, for example, Filipino families were similar to most American households while those of Chinese and Japanese Americans were higher than that of U.S. families in general.

But to focus exclusively on the established Asian American communities, their identity perceptions and cultural values as determinants of communication, is to neglect a growing population of Asian immigrants just beginning to assimilate American mores and culture. This body of recently arrived immigrants, mainly from Taiwan, Korea and the Philippines now constitute a distinctly new and visible grouping in several urban communities. In mere numbers they have grown both substantially and rapidly ever since the passage in 1965 of reform immigration laws eliminating discriminatory quota provisions. The Filipino community, for example, more than doubled in California between 1960 and 1970 and trippled in the city of San Francisco. The significant growth of immigrants from Asia can be clearly seen from the following table:[3]

Table 2
Immigrants Born in Specified Countries and Areas--1972

Country of Birth	1965	1972	Percent Change
China and Taiwan	4,057	17,339	+ 327.4%
Japan	3,180	4,757	+ 49.6%
Korea	2,165	18,876	+ 771.9%
Philippines	3,130	29,376	+ 838.5%

Unlike the established members in the relatively stable Asian American communities, the new immigrants have unique linguistic and educational problems in their adjustments to American society. Indeed, most of the recent focus with regards to adjustment difficulties for the new Asian immigrants has centered on the public school system and the emergence of new bilingual programs to facilitate American assimilation.

Currently, the school is viewed as a facilitator of interethnic communication and a promoter of bilingualism. In terms of American public education, however, this is a relatively new concept, achieved only after decades of legal battles and entanglements. In the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision some twenty years ago, the school was recognized as a perpetrative force of disturbing racial and social inequities. More recently in 1974, the Supreme Court's *Lau v. Nichols* decision again called attention to the serious educational roadblocks which can be legitimatized in the name of supposed educational goals and structure. While this case involved Chinese Americans and the San Francisco school system, it centered on a major social problem directly affecting the new Asian immigrant as well as other bilingual ethnic groups. The Lau decision dealt with the rights of limited or non-English-speaking students; the issue was one of linguistic and cultural concerns as they related to the multilingual and multicultural nature of American society.

The demands of the Chinese Americans involved were clear. For Ling-chi Wang, lecturer in the Asian Studies Division of the Department of Ethnic Studies at the University of California, Berkeley,

> No one was questioning the need for the Chinese speaking student to acquire a basic fluency in English as quickly as possible in order to function adequately in school and society. However, to ignore what he already knew and could comprehend in his native language; to treat her as if she knew nothing or as if she were stupid; or to try forcibly to put him in all-English classes was educationally unsound, psychologically repressive and in direct violation of his legal right to a basic education. Our deep concern for our children's right to learn English, receive a basic education in a language they knew, and develop a positive self-image were the reasons for filing the lawsuit and challenging a status quo that was irresponsive and repressive.[4]

The Chinese American filed their suit on March 25, 1970 and after four years, on January 21, 1974 the U.S. Supreme Court unanimously ruled that the San Francisco school system did not provide adequate aid to some 1,800 Chinese American students who required special language instruction in English, thereby constituting a denial of "a meaningful opportunity to participate in the public educational program." According to the court, there was "no equality of treatment merely by providing students with the same facilities, textbooks, teachers and curriculum; for students who do not understand English are effectively foreclosed from any meaningful education."[15]

The Supreme Court's concern was that appropriate measures of relief be undertaken by the San Francisco School District. Although it did not deliberately state the specific nature of such relief, according to Ling-chi Wang, it was clear that "the decision could be implemented adequately only through comprehensive bilingual instruction given by bilingual teachers. In short, the Supreme Court decision implicitly mandated bilingual education."[6]

For Wang this interpretation was supported by the new Bilingual Education Act (sec. 105 of the Education Amendments of 1974) signed by President Ford on August 21, 1974. Providing more than $700 million over a five year period in an attempt to offer equal educational opportunities to limited-English-speaking students, the law stated:

> Recognizing (1) that there are large numbers of children of limited English-speaking ability; (2) that many such children have a cultural heritage which differs from that of English-speaking persons; (3) that a primary means by which a child learns is through the use of such child's language and cultural heritage; (4) that, therefore, large numbers of children of limited English-speaking ability have educational needs which can be met by the use of bilingual

> educational methods and techniques; and (5) that, in addition, children of limited English-speaking ability benefit through the fullest utilization of multiple language and cultural resources, the Congress declares it to be the policy of the U.S., in order to establish equal educational opportunity for all children (A) to encourage the establishment and operation, where appropriate, of educational programs using bilingual educational practices, techniques,and methods, and (B) for that purpose, to provide financial assistance to local educational agencies, and to State educational agencies...[7]

Among leaders of non-English speaking students such an endorsement for bilingual programs followed the mandate of the Lau decision because it rested on sound educational principles which met not only the scrutiny of Congress but had greater merit when compared to E.S.L., English as a Second Language programs or remedial reading approaches. These educational principles as summarized and endorsed by the U.S. Senate were: (1) by using the native language to teach other subjects, the education of the child is not interrupted from home to school, thus his retardation in other subjects is prevented while at the same time he learns English; (2) teaching the child to read first in the language he brings with him facilitates his learning to read and write in a second language because the essential skills of reading are generally transferable from one language to another; (3) intergrating familiar experiences, community, history, and cultural heritage with the curriculum helps to develop the student's pride and self-confidence as well as heightens his interest and motivation in school; and (4) recognizing the language and cultural background of all students through bilingual-bicultural education reinforces and increases communication between home and school, thereby enhancing the student's motivation and achievement.[8]

In the light of the Lau case and its tacit implications for bilingual education and principles a clearer view of not only the social adjustment and communication concerns of the new Asian immigrant but those of Mexican Americans and others of various nationalities can be seen. Certainly, the rights of non-English speaking peoples provide a basic insight into the linguistic barriers encountered toward integration and assimilation. And more importantly, it serves as an issue which commands wide attention and support. Though initially advocated by a small group of Chinese Americans it has led to other Federal Court suits, *Serna v. Portales Municipal School District* in New Mexico and *Aspira v. The New York City Board of Education* firmly establishing the case for the bilingual-bicultural needs of several minority peoples endeavoring to enter the mainstream of American society.

Conclusion

Communication serves as a social link between individuals, a fundamental human behavior without which we could not transmit the emotions, desires, ambitions, and emphathies that make us human. And for the cultural immigrant, communication is the essential tool of social adaptation. To assimilate, to achieve desired ends, to join in the community of man requires the ability to convey thoughts and interests in a multi-racial environment.

To be sure, in the process of interethnic communication, various problems may result which can either block or hinder full understanding of the message being conveyed. Identity perception, how the individual views himself in relation to his culture and society, is one such determinant of communication. Cultural dissonance or incompatibilities between diverse people can also be another factor leading to communicative impairment. Both identity perception and cultural dissonance can turn interethnic communication into a process characterized more by racial discord and jealousies rather than harmonious dialogue and cultural interchange.

As has been discussed, the communication of the Asian American assimilated into the mainstream of American middle-class society also can be affected by such identity or cultural problems. Ethnic background, locality and generation have created a multi-dimensional self-identity for the Asian American obscuring simple generalities. Communication is affected by the age, the cultural background and place of residence to such a degree that the term Asian American becomes merely a rubric of political action or bureaucratic simplicity. Moreover, because of certain Asian American cultural values, namely filial piety and shame, the factor of cultural dissonance is also created. These values of acquiescence in context to American society and established behavioral norms may serve to impede the communication process of Asians, particularly as it occurs outside of their immediate family or ethnic peer group.

Beyond these concerns related to Asian American communication, special note also should be taken of the new Asian immigrants and their potential assimilation into the American mainstream. Linguistic problems in the schools, leading to problems in housing, welfare and employment are mounting concerns for this new Asian American group demanding a reevaluation of basic assumptions pertaining to the role of public education in this country. To ameliorate difficulties for the young immigrant child, to activate the school system as an impartial facilitator of intercultural contact and assimilation, the trend has been towards a recognition of bilingual education as a means of enhancing communicative skills and techniques. Such a trend, as generated by the new immigrant, seems a harbinger for a more realistic cultural pluralism conducive to America's historic image and future development.

Footnotes

[1]Also refer to *A Study of Selected Socioeconomic Characteristics of Ethnic Minorities Based on 1970 Census, Volume II: Asian American.* Urban Associates, Inc. 1974, p. 17.

[2]Colin Watanabe, "Self-Expression and the Asian American Experience," *Personnel and Guidance Journal*, Volume 51, No. 6, February 1973, p. 393.

[3]U.S., Department of Justice, Immigration and Naturalization Service, *1972 Annual Report.*

[4]Ling-chi Wang, "Lau v. Nichols: The Right of Limited-English-speaking Students," *Amerasia Journal*, Volume 2, No. 2, Fall 1974, p. 20.

[5]Supreme Court of the U.S., No. 72-6520.

[6]Wang, p. 22.

[7]Senate Report No. 93-763, 93rd Congress, 2nd Session, March 29, 1974.

[8]Senate Report No. 93-763, p. 45.

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